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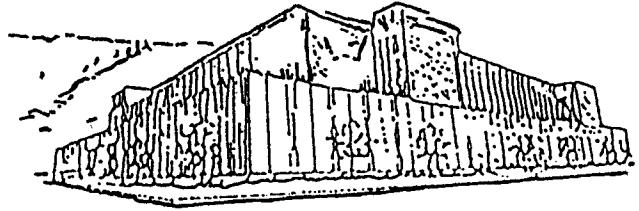
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“She will be a poet[ ]in another hundred years’ time”

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* as a Quest for Incandescence

by

Christopher Piazzola

B.A., North Central College, 1994

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

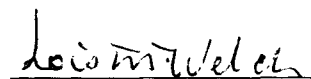
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“She will be a poet[ ] in another hundred years’ time”· Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* as a Quest for Incandescence (30 pp.)

Director: Lois Welch

*lvw*

Since its publication in 1928, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* has both amused and puzzled readers. Characterized by a tone of farce, it features a protagonist, Orlando, whose sex changes mid-way through the novel. In addition, its main character’s timelessness carries her/him through five centuries, from the Elizabethan age to the twentieth century

Critical discussion of *Orlando* often centers around the question of where to locate it in relation to traditional literary sub-genres. Many have interpreted the novel as a challenge to the form of either the novel or the biography

A few critics have read *Orlando* in a more affirmative way, as a variation of the romantic quest. In the traditional quest pattern, the hero of the quest departs from home to face tests of courage, strength, wits, and faith. According to critics such as Harold Bloom, the romantic quest “internalizes” this quest pattern, so that the quest becomes an allegory for the writer’s attempt to refine her/his powers of composition.

In this thesis, I argue that *Orlando* both adopts and feminizes the conventions of the romantic quest. At the start of the novel, a young, male, aristocratic Orlando possesses the qualities of a patriarchal quest hero. But as the novel proceeds, Orlando’s tastes shift from philandering to poetry, and “he” becomes “she.” The events of the plot become increasingly fanciful, as the heroine finds herself only 36 years old after the passage of four centuries.

Woolf’s novel challenges the convention of the solitary quester by emphasizing the importance of relationship, as Orlando reiterates her desire to find the elusive goals of “life and a lover.” In addition, Woolf’s choice of a female protagonist undercuts the tradition of the masculine quest hero. In other ways, though, *Orlando* conforms with the pattern of the romantic quest, most notably in its protagonist’s desires for creative fulfillment and personal transformation.

But given that Woolf is engaged in questioning the very notion of straightforward directions, it is not clear where those lines will be, or where they will go; nor what a woman may look like 'if and when' she has succeeded in changing the conditions of travel and the present timetable.

–Rachel Bowlby in *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*

In *Orlando* (1928), Virginia Woolf balances the main character's isolation with the need for meaningful relationship. In the tradition of the romantic quest, Orlando must overcome obstacles to self-fulfillment in order to release creative energies. In this paper, I argue that *Orlando* recasts the conventions of the quest narrative by emphasizing the importance of relationship. The text depicts a relatively solitary character hurtling through English literary history, driven by a compulsion to write. But Orlando's solitude weighs against the desire for communion with "life and a lover" (184). As James Naremore says, *Orlando* represents "another attempt to overcome the problem of isolation; it allowed [Woolf] to suggest that the envelope surrounding individual lives is in some sense permeable, permitting some contact with what lies 'outside'" (191). The destinations of Orlando's quest are three-fold: (1) to engage in meaningful relationships; (2) to fully realize her/his poetic powers; and (3) to affirm the continual process of her/his self-transformation in spite of obstacles and crises. These ends of Orlando's quest at times appear most clearly in their absence, as the protagonist works to overcome the triple crises of non-relationship, stifled creativity, and a fixed identity

Harold Bloom's enthusiasm for *Orlando* may be explained at least partially by the novel's adherence to a traditional quest pattern. Bloom's interpretation of *Orlando* as an internalized quest is summarized in his statement: "[Orlando's] two

grand passions, for the improbable Russian princess, Sasha, and for the even more absurd sea captain, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, can best be regarded as solipsistic projections: there is really only one character in *Orlando*” (1994 442). While I argue here that Orlando avoids the pitfall of solipsism through an emphasis on relationship, I agree with his characterization of *Orlando* as a quest.<sup>1</sup>

In Bloom’s earlier essay, “The Internalization of Quest Romance,” he describes the internalized quest poem as an attempt to reconcile tensions within the romantic conception of the self. In the inward trajectory of the romantic quest, the poet’s development becomes a “continuous allegory” manifested in the dynamic of the poem. While the hero of the medieval quest contends with external antagonists (such as dragons and evil sorcerers) in the search for spiritual enlightenment, the romantic poet must overcome obstacles to creative fulfillment through the medium of the poem. Bloom says, “The hero of the internalized quest is the poet himself, the antagonists of the quest are everything in the self that blocks imaginative work” (8). Since the romantic quest is a story of the self’s relationship with its own creative energies, Bloom denies that it can represent a reconciliation between self and world, or a relationship between autonomous agents. From Bloom’s standpoint, *Orlando* represents a field in which Woolf attempts to achieve creative fulfillment, and the different characters represent forces within her imagination which either impel or impede the flow of creative energy. Thus, Bloom contends that “there is really only one character in *Orlando*.”

While Bloom identifies the different characters of *Orlando* as forces in Woolf’s imagination, Orlando’s relationships with her writing and Shelmerdine



suggest a communion between the protagonist and the “other” which cannot be characterized as solipsistic projections. As Naremore says, Woolf does “permit some contact with what lies ‘outside.’” Earlier I identified the “destinations” of Orlando’s quest as the desire for (1) relationship, (2) poetic powers, and (3) self-transformation. I interpret the end of *Orlando* as a partial fulfillment of its protagonist’s quest, symbolized by the novel’s closing image of the fantastic reunion of Orlando with Shelmerdine and the “wild goose” (which I discuss in further detail below). My interpretation accords better with Northrop Frye’s account of the romantic quest, in which “identity turns downward and inward, toward a hidden basis or ground of identity between man and nature” (Bloom 1970: 10). Unlike Bloom, Frye affirms the romantic quest’s ability to reconcile its protagonist with external forces, to affirm the relationship between humans and the world.

Whether we interpret the quest as Woolf’s or Orlando’s (in this paper I focus on the latter), “incandescence” is one criterion by which the reader can measure its success. The term “incandescence” is Woolf’s revision of the modernist ideal of aesthetic impersonality, appearing first in *Orlando*, then in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) a year later. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf writes that Shakespeare’s mind epitomizes this quality of “incandescence”: “All desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievance was fired out of him and consumed” (57). Does *Orlando* represent Woolf’s attempt to embody the aesthetic ideals which would be articulated in *A Room of One’s Own*, such as the “incandescent” (57)

and “androgynous mind” (98)? In reading *Orlando* alongside *A Room of One's Own*, it becomes clear that Woolf had similar concerns in mind as she wrote both texts. Kari Elise Lokke stresses the continuities between the aesthetic approaches in the two texts, writing that *Orlando* “brilliantly embodies the seemingly contradictory political and aesthetic theories of *A Room of One's Own*” (236).<sup>2</sup> Lokke explores how the text's treatment of androgyny and poetic creation complicates the rhetoric of impersonality favored by masculine modernists. For Lokke, *Orlando* “admonish[es] women to be both selfless and self-assertive, disembodied and female, apolitical and partisan, Kantian and feminist” (235). Throughout her article, Lokke emphasizes the ways that Woolf rewrites the masculine aspects of romanticism and modernism through a feminist emphasis on relationship over individualism.

As Orlando learns, poetry's value resides in its representation of the relationship between writer and world. At the novel's end, Orlando reflects, “Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?” (325). Orlando views her connection to writing as a “transaction,” a relationship, and sometimes a lover's quarrel, finding meaning in the subtle give-and-take between writer and world. She muses,

What could have been more secret, she thought, more slow, and like the intercourse of lovers, than the stammering answer she had made all these years to the old crooning song of the woods, and the farms and the brown horses standing at the gate, neck to neck, and the smithy and the kitchen and the fields, so laboriously bearing wheat, turnips, grass, and the gardens blowing irises and fritillaries? (325)

Writing offers Orlando a source of communication with the world, a relationship beyond the borders of the self. The narrator personifies nature by attributing to it a voice. Nature and the writer speak the same language, allowing them to establish communion. Thus, Orlando comes to view nature as familiar and decipherable rather than threatening and sublime.

For Orlando, poetry is not just a field in which the creative energies are expressed. It engages in a conversation with the outside world, with the “crooning song of the woods.” Orlando’s aesthetic, represented in her vision of writing as “a voice answering a voice,” refutes Bloom’s claim that the text conveys mere solipsism. By acknowledging poetry’s function as a writer’s response to an external invocation, Woolf intimates that the writing process does not take place in the vacuum of an isolated consciousness. Rather, it is formed through an awareness of other voices. I do not mean to suggest that Bloom is unaware of the modern crisis of non-relationship. According to Bloom, the romantics are concerned with the problems of subjectivity and separation in a world that “progressively learned to devalue contact between the self and others, the self and the outer world, the self and the body” (1970: 7). But he responds to the problem of personal disconnection by seeking to reintegrate the self *with itself*, rather than by trying to find a reconciliation between self and other. Orlando, however, pursues both psychic integration and meaningful relationships; consequently, her epiphany at novel’s end arrives after she both brings her multiple selves into harmony and reunites with Shelmerdine. In its emphasis on relationship, *Orlando* reinscribes the dynamic of the solitary romantic quest.

The majority of the narrative, however, chronicles Orlando's enduring crisis of non-relationship. During the Elizabethan Age alone, Orlando experiences unfulfilling relationships with the following: "an old woman, all skin and bone. Red-cheeked trulls too many to mention. A puling nun. A hard-bitten cruel-mouthed adventuress. A nodding mass of lace and ceremony" (40). Shortly thereafter, both the Russian "princess" Sasha and the poet Nick Greene betray Orlando. The crisis of non-relationship continues as the transgender Archduchess/Archduke Harriet/Harry Griselda stalks Orlando in a relentless and absurd marriage suit, and later, as Orlando grows disillusioned with Augustan soirees and writers.

Among these relationship debacles, Orlando's two early betrayals in the novel, by the Russian princess Sasha and by the poet Nick Greene, pose the most serious threats to Orlando's quest for meaningful relationship. Orlando's jilting by Sasha, his first and deepest love, scars the protagonist throughout the novel. First, the Elizabethan Orlando finds Sasha in the embrace of a Russian seaman; then, after offering a feeble excuse for the treacherous liaison, the princess fails to elope with him on the eve of the Great Frost. This betrayal brings on Orlando's first "trance," preserving his identity in the face of inconsolable anguish. For seven days Orlando sleeps away the pain of losing Sasha. The narrator wonders if the trance brings Orlando closer to a state of "incandescence".

Are they remedial measures – trances in which the most galling memories, events that seem likely to cripple life for ever, are brushed with a dark wing which rubs their harshness off and gilds them, even the ugliest, and basest, with a lustre, an incandescence?  
(67)

But Orlando's trance does not entirely whitewash his painful memories of Sasha's treachery. Even at the end of the novel, almost four hundred years later, Orlando can feel the pang of betrayal, yelling "Faithless!" while shopping in a London department store on seeing a woman who resembles Sasha (303). Orlando is also scarred by the ingratitude shown him by the poet Nick Greene. As the narrator says, "In our belief, Greene's ridicule of his tragedy hurt him as much as the Princess' ridicule of his love" (102). Impressed with Greene's status as poet, Orlando invites him to his estate for dinner and conversation. However, Greene shows his host (and eventual patron) the ingratitude of writing a satire about the event titled "A Visit to a Nobleman in the Country." The crisis of non-relationship reaches a new pitch after this episode with Greene, as Orlando resolves, "I have done with men" (96).<sup>3</sup>

Only with Orlando's marriage to the enigmatic Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine does she establish a fulfilling relationship. Orlando and Shelmerdine not only have an uncanny understanding of one another, but they also recognize each other as quasi-androgynous beings. Orlando and Shelmerdine are able to communicate in through a seemingly unintelligible "cypher language" in which "'Rattigan Glumphoboo' described a very complicated spiritual state – which if the reader puts all his intelligence at our service he may discover for himself" (283). The couple's psychic bond appears, as well, when Shelmerdine is about to disembark for Cape Horn, as "an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously 'You're a woman, Shel!' she cried. 'You're a man, Orlando!' he

cried” (252). As each recognizes the other’s quasi-androgyny, their union begins to resemble Woolf’s creative ideal in *A Room of One’s Own*: “If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman must also have intercourse with the man in her” (98).

Some critics have argued that Orlando’s relationship with Shelmerdine is either a masquerade or a relationship of convenience. For instance, Jamie Hovey contends that “having a ‘husband at the Cape,’ while hypocritical perhaps, allows Orlando to elude moral surveillance of her lesbian poetry” (402). And Kathy Phillips writes, “Once joined to Shelmerdine, Orlando does enjoy a happy marriage – despite his absences to South Africa – or, rather, because of them” (197). The critics’ cynicism toward the marriage fails to explain Orlando’s ecstatic response to Shelmerdine’s return at the end of the novel. Although it may be unconventional and at times pragmatic, Orlando’s marriage to Shelmerdine is more than a masquerade or a convenient arrangement. Orlando’s quest remains unfulfilled in the absence of a meaningful human connection, and her union with Shelmerdine signals the end of her relationship crisis.

\* \* \*

Since Bloom argues that there is really only one character in *Orlando*, he would dismiss the notion that the protagonist could achieve meaningful relationship. He says that the poet is a seeker “not after nature but after his own mature powers” (15). Like Bloom, Maria DiBattista interprets *Orlando* as Woolf’s quest to reach maturity as a writer. DiBattista’s commentary on *Orlando* accords better with Bloom’s description of the individualistic romantic quest than with

Lokke's interpretation of *Orlando* as an affirmation of relationship. She says that the "goal of Orlando's quest" is to find for Woolf "a serviceable and expressive style" (127). Calling the novel a "poetic quest," DiBattista writes, "Woolf's comic, playful expression in *Orlando* springs from an aggressive impulse directed against all she perceives as threatening to the integrity and freedom of the self – the pretentious, the powerful, the potentially tyrannical" (115). According to her reading, the characters in the novel – including Sasha, Lady Euphrosyne, and Nick Greene – are either muses for or impediments to Orlando's writing quest (136).

In *Orlando*, Woolf maps out the space she must inhabit in order to achieve success as a writer. Orlando's shifting gender concretely represents the notion that "a great mind is androgynous" (*AROO* 98): the writer must partake of both the mind's male and female qualities to reach poetic maturity. To succeed as a writer, Woolf must also draw on the long tradition of literature from the Elizabethans through the modern day, which explains Orlando's cursory tour through English literary history. In her parodic "Preface" to *Orlando*, Woolf thanks those who have influenced her in writing the novel. She writes, "Some are dead and so illustrious that I scarcely dare name them, yet no one can read or write without being perpetually in the debt of Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Macaulay, Emily Bronte, De Quincey, and Walter Pater" (vii). Woolf's exaggerated deference to these literary figures (in such phrases as "no one" and "perpetually in the debt") foreshadows the parody she subjects them to in the course of her novel. But Woolf's parodies of such writers as Defoe, Browne, and Bronte also reveal her literary "debt" to them. Thus, Woolf remains fundamentally

ambivalent to literary tradition in *Orlando*, as she explores the literary terrain she must negotiate to fulfill her own writing quest.<sup>4</sup>

Orlando's compulsion to write is one aspect of her/his identity that remains constant in the text. Orlando continues to write throughout her/his gender oscillations and changes in class, fortune, and marital status. In its emphasis on writers and the writing process, *Orlando* calls attention to its own textuality while dramatizing the writer's quest. From the novel's first pages – as Orlando writes morality plays and sees a writer in his study, and as Queen Elizabeth “reads Orlando like a page” – to its closing image of the “wild goose” as muse, *Orlando* is a *text about texts* and the writing process. Orlando's most enduring childhood memory is of a writer at his study. As she returns from Turkey to London, Orlando's first sight of Saint Paul's dome reminds her of her “earliest, most persistent memory – the man with the big forehead in Twitchett's sitting room, the man who sat writing” (164). *Orlando*'s emphasis on writing and textuality mirrors the model of the fluid self put forth in the novel, as several critics have noted. For instance, Christy Burns says, “[N]otions of the self are intricately linked to writing for Woolf” (357). Pamela Caughie adds, “The text of *Orlando* is as unstable as the sex of Orlando.[..] This novel, then, is a text about writing, about constructing lives, histories, identities, and fictions” (408). A prime example of textual uncertainty giving rise to a crisis of identity appears in the novel's first sentence, where the clause “for there could be no doubt of his sex” immediately raises suspicion about the accuracy of this account of Orlando's gender (13). Since the theme of writing in the novel is just as slippery as Orlando's fluid selfhood,



ascertaining the role of writing becomes crucial to understanding Orlando's indeterminate identity

In the tradition of the romantic quest, Orlando's self-exploration and self-overcoming in the middle section of the novel are preconditions for her poetic development. According to the narrator, Orlando's development as a writer is coterminous with an exploration of her subjectivity:

Slowly there had opened within her something intricate and many-chambered, which one must take a torch to explore, in prose not verse; and she remembered how passionately she had studied that doctor at Norwich, Browne, whose book was at her hand there. She had formed her in solitude after her affair with Greene, or tried to form, for Heaven knows, these growths are age-long in coming, a spirit capable of resistance. "I will write," she had said, "what I enjoy writing." (175)

The narrator explicitly connects Orlando's emerging subjectivity ("something intricate and many-chambered") with her writing. The full force of this passage is fleshed out when juxtaposed with a similar passage from *A Room of One's Own* in which Woolf discusses the hypothetical writer Mary Carmichael. Woolf writes, "For if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been" (84). Woolf's "chamber," mentioned in a similar context in *Orlando*, refers to uncharted psychic terrain. For Woolf, exploring these "chambers," the vast expanses of the creative imagination and the unconscious, must accompany any successful poetic quest.

Not only does the poetic quest play itself out in Orlando's flowering subjectivity, but it is also dramatized in Orlando's relationships with other writers, such as Nick Greene. Obsessed with the past and favoring a slavish aesthetic, Nick

Greene serves as a foil to Orlando throughout the novel, exposing Orlando to a negative model of writing and criticism. As DiBattista says, “[T]he caricature value of Greene’s aesthetic is that it generates an antithetical value, the ‘value of obscurity and the delight of having no name’” (135). As DiBattista’s observation illustrates, Greene’s function in the narrative is to serve as a negative example, or counter-muse. The unique relationship between Orlando and Greene creates a structural tension in the novel, as they are the only two characters to last its four-century span. Thus, the protagonist’s centuries-long view of tradition invites comparison with that of the equally enduring poet-turned-literary-critic. Perhaps the most salient differences between Orlando and Greene are their divergent views on writing and tradition. While Orlando adapts to new ages, Greene consistently harbors resentment toward the changing present. The rigidity of his views on literature portray a truly “fixed” self. As Bowlby says, “In Orlando, the negative – pessimistic, nostalgic – version of the ‘spirit of the age’ form of history is offered by the dubious ‘man of letters,’ Nick Greene” (130). Greene provides a foil for the affirmative stance that Orlando will take toward writing and changing social orders. The Elizabethan Greene’s motive for writing is based on the idea of “La Gloire” (he pronounces this term “Glawr”), which he describes as a way to “cherish the past” and “take antiquity for [a] model” (90). Venerating classical literary forms, Greene says that if he had a pension, he would “live for Glawr alone. I would lie in bed every morning reading Cicero. I would imitate his style so that you couldn’t tell the difference between us. That’s what I call fine writing” (90). Greene is the prototypical neo-classicist, worshipping at the shrine of

antiquity. These attitudes taint his critical appreciation of the Elizabethans: “No, he concluded, the great age of literature is past; the great age of literature was the Greek; the Elizabethan was inferior in every respect to the Greek.” He says his own age “is marked by precious conceits and wild experiments – neither of which the Greeks would have tolerated for a moment” (89). That Greene cannot see the greatness of his own literary age (including that of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Donne) because of his blind devotion to the Greeks and Cicero confirms his seriously flawed perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout *Orlando*, Nick Greene views contemporary culture and literature as decadent. His reappearance in the novel during the Victorian age reasserts the inferiority of the present to the past, as Greene parrots his nostalgia for classical literature even though his social standing has changed dramatically. Echoing his earlier assessment of the Elizabethans, Greene now characterizes the Victorian age as “marked by precious conceits and wild experiments – none of which the Elizabethans would have tolerated for an instant” (278). Unwilling to adapt to the present age like his foil Orlando, Greene arrives at a state of fixed identity. Ironically, his closed-mindedness to the present is embraced by Victorian culture, and paves the way for his social ascendancy during the era. Once “neither servant, squire, or noble,” the narrator tells the reader that the Victorian Greene “was a knight; he was a Litt.D., he was a Professor” (276). During their conversation, Orlando becomes disillusioned by the changes in her “old, her very old friend”

Orlando was unaccountably disappointed. She had thought of

literature all these years (her seclusion, her rank, her sex must be her excuse) as something wild as the wind, hot as fire, swift as lightning; something errant, incalculable, abrupt, and behold, literature was an elderly gentleman in a grey suit talking about duchesses. (280)

The personification of literature as “an elderly gentleman in a grey suit” is counterpointed by the radical transformation that Orlando has experienced (although Greene does not seem aware of Orlando’s change of gender). Rather than becoming a respectable older male like Greene, Orlando has become a female of diminished social standing. Yet the parodic, parenthetical statement attributing Orlando’s ecstatic, idealistic vision of literature to “her seclusion, her rank, her sex” ironically affirms Orlando’s perspective. In the Victorian era, literature’s “wildness” becomes repressed by the period’s emphasis on propriety and reserve.

Greene’s change in social status dramatizes the writer’s loss of energy and creative power through a capitulation to social values and a continual longing for past greatness. In contrast, Orlando’s quest becomes ecstatic at its conclusion. Invigorated rather than disappointed by transformation, Orlando embraces changing genders, social positions, and cultural-historical moments. The closing passage of the text affirms the importance of Orlando’s relationships with her husband and her muse. The fantastic appearance of Shelmerdine and the wild goose represents a partial fulfillment of Orlando’s writing quest:

“Here! Shel, here!” she cried, baring her breast to the moon (which now showed bright) so that her pearls glowed like the eggs of some vast moon-spider The aeroplane rushed out of the clouds and stood over her head. It hovered above her Her pearls burnt like a phosphorescent flare in the darkness.

And as Shelmerdine, now grown a fine sea captain, hale, fresh-colored, and alert, leapt to the ground, there sprang up over

his head a single wild bird.

“It’s the goose!” Orlando cried. “The wild goose. ” (328-9)

The text’s conclusion recalls an earlier moment in which Orlando has reflected on the phantom wild goose. In that passage, Orlando realizes that her identity crisis owes to her being “haunted” by the wild goose, “[e]ver since I was a child.”

Orlando laments that the goose “flies too fast,” so that she is forced to fling “after it words like nets” (313). Thus, Orlando envisions the elusive wild goose as her muse, to be captured only through writing.

If one reads *Orlando* as a writer’s quest, the closing images illustrate how artistic inspiration can emerge out of the deepest, darkest recesses of the mind. The tone of the final passage moves from calm and darkness to euphoria and brilliance. Just before the arrival of her husband and the wild goose, Orlando reflects that Shelmerdine “was coming, as he always came, in moments of dead calm.” The first stroke of midnight sounds and the night is described as “dark with clouds.” Is the vision of the illuminated wild goose emerging out of the black midnight calm a metaphor for how the creative energy springs from a state of placid impersonality? To put it another way: does Orlando achieve the state of “incandescence” at the end of the novel? Already Sasha has characterized the Elizabethan Orlando as “incandescent,” adding that “he was like a million-candled Christmas tree (such as they have in Russia, hung with yellow globes).” She goes on to say that “with his glowing cheeks, his dark curls, his black and crimson cloak, he looked as if he were burning with his own radiance, from a lamp lit within” (54). Later, in the closing passage of the novel, the incandescence of the

scene reflects the workings of Orlando's psyche. Out of the "dead calm" of midnight, the scintillating pearls on her neck express a quality of incandescence, as they "burn like a phosphorescent flare in the darkness."<sup>6</sup> The mystical calm of the night when Orlando realizes her vision resembles the dusky internal tranquillity she experiences just after the arrival of her "single self." In that passage, Orlando retreats into the most obscure chasms of her mind, peering into

the back of her brain (which is the part furthest from sight) into a pool where things dwell in darkness so deep that what they are we scarcely know. She now looked down into this pool or sea in which everything is reflected – and, indeed, some say that all our most violent passions, and art and religion are the reflections which we see in the dark hollow at the back of the head when the visible world is obscured for a time. (323)

Significantly, Woolf writes that the creative brilliance of "art and religion" springs from the furthest reaches of the mind. There are parallels between these dark, distant pools and the aesthetic ideal of "incandescence." In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes that Shakespeare's poetic genius derives from the rejection in his art of "grudges and spites and antipathies" (56). Likewise, Orlando's illuminated creative vision and coherent selfhood emerge not from resentment, but from the realm of her psyche which transcends everyday concerns and irritations.

Orlando's gradual movement toward a state of incandescence follows her rejection of the ambitions for personal fame and wealth. At the conclusion of the text, she renounces the desire to achieve glory and fortune through her writing. As she prepares to bury her prizewinning book of poetry, Orlando reflects,

She was reminded of old Greene getting upon a platform the other day, comparing her with Milton (save for his blindness) and handing her a cheque for two hundred guineas. She had thought then of the

oak tree on its hill, and what has that got to do with this, she had wondered? What has praise and fame got to do with poetry? (325)

Orlando begins to identify poetry as a natural process (like an “oak tree on its hill”) rather than as an endeavor motivated by personal ambitions or grudges. She achieves a measure of incandescence by ignoring the petty grievances and “Glawr” which drive her anti-muse, Nick Greene.

\* \* \*

While Greene’s unchanging opinions reveal his fixed identity, Orlando’s quest suggests a continual “becoming,” an endless movement of transformation.<sup>7</sup> S/he switches genders, changes marital status, reinvents her writing style and adapts to new cultural-historical moments. Judy Little characterizes Orlando as existing in a perpetual “liminal” state, which is “just outside of any congealed and solemn definition of what society is, or what the sexes are, or what a self is” (74).<sup>8</sup> In this way, Orlando’s quest is similar to those of the romantics in its rejection of fixed identity. As Bloom says, “The final enemy to be overcome [in the internalized quest] is a recalcitrance in the self,” what Keats calls “Identity” (1970: 11). Throughout the text, Orlando refuses to settle for a stable identity. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari characterize *Orlando* this way: “*Orlando* already does not operate by memories, but by blocks, blocks of ages, blocks of epochs, blocks of the kingdom of nature, blocks of sexes, forming so many becomings between things, so many lines of deterritorialization” (294). Orlando is the figure of the eternal poet, continually re-negotiating new ages and social conventions. Indeed the reader finds in Orlando not an historical personage but a figure surviving

through parts of five centuries, seemingly defying death. Thus, Orlando's refusal to accept a fixed identity translates into an eternal transformation. *Orlando's* narrator says, "She, who believed in no immortality, could not help feeling that her soul would come and go for ever with the reds on the panels and the greens on the sofa" (317). Similarly, Harold Bloom asks, "Can Orlando ever die? [ T]he central consciousness exemplifies a poetry without death" (1994 445). For Orlando, writing is a form of immortality, in contrast with the narrator's mechanical writing, which continues "till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads" (65). The fixing of Orlando's identity, the end of his/her poetic quest, would be tantamount to death.<sup>9</sup>

Orlando's perpetual transformation depends upon her/his ability to go into a trance during times of extreme distress. As such, the trance wraps the protagonist in a protective cocoon, allowing Orlando to emerge an unharmed yet changed creature. The narrator equates the trance with a type of resurrection, a mixture of involuntary death-in-life: "And then what strange powers are these that penetrate our most secret ways and change our most treasured possessions without our willing it? Had Orlando, worn out by the extremity of his suffering, died for a week, and then come to life again?" (68). Orlando's trances rescue him during two desperate moments in his life: first, from the shock of Sasha's betrayal; and second, during the revolution in Turkey, from which Orlando emerges as a woman.

Orlando's "becoming" is unique in that it is marked not by a progression toward conventionality and power (like that of Greene), but rather by relative



social decline. Rather than guarding herself against the “other” through a rigid identity, Orlando participates in social marginality. Through the course of the narrative, Orlando changes from an aristocratic, Elizabethan male adventurer to a twentieth-century female poet. Susan Squier reads *Orlando* as a rewriting of Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* because of its focus on an increasingly marginalized character. Squier says,

Moll Flanders develops from a position of social marginality (as a pickpocket, whore, and bigamist) to a penitent identification with conventional social values, while Orlando moves from a position of privileged centrality (due to his aristocratic lineage, great hereditary wealth, and masculine prerogative) to a position of social marginality as a woman and poet, a position both character and novel affirm. (123)

Woolf’s emphasis on a character who affirms social marginality rather than social conventionality revises Defoe’s moralistic ending. In this way, *Orlando* is a revision of the traditional quest in which the protagonist returns from a heroic struggle to a position of wealth, fame, and political power. In spite of the decline in social prestige, Squier notes that “both character and novel affirm” Orlando’s diminished standing.

Woolf’s affirmative stance toward her “fallen” protagonist reinforces her ideal that contact with the other is indispensable to creativity. Thomas Caramagno writes of *Orlando* that even while the protagonist experiences a social decline, s/he is affirmed. “Orlando’s sexuality is enriched, not weakened, by plurality” (183). Bloom adds, “It is the female Orlando whose aestheticism becomes wonderfully aggressive and post-Christian” (1994: 444). And Ellen Carol Jones says, “Orlando is Nietzsche’s affirmative woman, the woman who is not affirmed by man but who

affirms herself' (109)<sup>10</sup> In *Orlando*, Woolf rewrites the negative assessment of woman inscribed by a dominant strain of modernism. While the rhetoric of masculine modernism present plurality, fluidity, and sensuality in a negative light, Orlando embraces these qualities through her/his transformation, denigrating mastery as a turning away from the other <sup>11</sup>

Orlando's transformation, or "becoming," does not proceed without difficulties. Following the pattern of the romantic quest, *Orlando's* personal journey involves both crisis and recovery Bloom argues that the romantics are "crisis poets" who deal with the problem of "separation" by imagining the poet's union with "his former selfless self" (1970: 16). Likewise, Orlando's crisis at the end of the novel stems from an awareness of her fragmented subjectivity In the scene where Orlando invokes her "true" self to replace her fragmented selves, she seems to be calling for the return of what Bloom denominates the "former selfless self." In the final passage of the text, Orlando is faced with the crisis of finding coherence in her fragmented, multiple self, which can only be achieved by the arrival of what she terms her "conscious" or "single" self. Orlando's fragmented subjectivity is accompanied by a shattered perception of reality As she ventures through London's city streets, Orlando cannot read any of the signs she passes in their entirety She reads, "Ra—Un," "Amor Vin," and "Applejohn and Applebed, Undert—" (307). Significantly, the unreadable signs relate to two basic issues of the human condition: love ("Amor") and death ("Undert—"). In the modern age, Orlando's fractured perspective prevents her from interpreting and engaging in the mysteries of human existence. Her inability to attain a coherent vision of reality

signifies the unfulfilled nature of her quest.

After having trouble reading the signs of the modern age, Orlando becomes aware of the fleeting and fragmentary nature of modern life, and she considers the hyperbolically multiple nature of her self. She wonders, “But if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different peoples are there not – Heaven help us – all having lodgement in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two” (308). Orlando then proceeds to invoke her “true self”. “This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all” (310). Is Woolf parodying or assenting to the idea of a “true” self in this passage? Lokke says, “The phrase ‘they say’ and the negative connotations of the words ‘commanded’ and ‘locked up’ suggest that this Captain self does not in fact represent Woolf’s ideal of free and creative selfhood” (245). While the terms “Captain” and “Key” satirize the notion of a mechanism which “commands” all the other selves, Woolf does not seem entirely antagonistic toward the idea of an elusive, synthesizing self here. In the same passage, the narrator describes the “true” self more sympathetically as “the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire” (310).

The eventual arrival of Orlando’s “true” self brings an end to her personal crisis. Calm overcomes her as “the Orlando whom she had called came of its own accord” (313).

So she was now darkened, stilled, and become, with the addition of

this Orlando, what is called, rightly or wrongly, a single self, a real self. And she fell silent. For it is probable that when people talk aloud, the selves (of which here may be more than two thousand) are conscious of dissection, and are trying to communicate but when communication is established there is nothing more to be said (314).

The arrival of Orlando's "single self" leads her beyond the crisis of her fragmented identity. Woolf suggests that it is a unified self which can reach beyond its own narrow self-concern and internal squabbling to a relationship with the larger world outside. With the arrival of Orlando's "former selfless self" comes a partial fulfillment of her poetic quest, as she reconciles the tensions within her fragmentary self, allowing her to attain internal harmony and relationship with the world outside. Notably, only after Orlando reconciles her own internal schisms is she capable of her reunion with Shelmerdine and the wild goose, suggesting that a self which is consumed by internal strife is unable to engage the outside world.

\* \* \*

Most critics view *Orlando* as a departure from Woolf's other novels. In addition to its atypical emphasis on fantasy and parody, one particular aspect of Orlando's life has particularly puzzled me: the relative absence of her/his family background. Because of the strong impression Woolf's parents made on her, and because of the attention Freud brought to the issue of familial determinism, virtually all of Woolf's novels feature direct depictions of parent/child relationships. Why do Orlando's parents factor so minimally in the plot of this novel? Further, where does Orlando's son go after his birth? I would argue that the answer lies in the nature of the romantic quest. Bloom explores the quest's

emphasis on freedom and self-fulfillment in opposition to the Freudian “reality principle.” The presence of Orlando’s parents would have imposed the constraints of parental authority upon the free-flowing, border-crossing nature of her/his quest. As DiBattista writes, “*Orlando* springs from an aggressive impulse directed against all she perceives as threatening to the integrity and freedom of the self – the pretentious, the powerful, the potentially tyrannical” (115). A focus on the family might have impinged upon Orlando’s freedom, bringing determinism and mortality to her/his quest. Thus, Orlando’s lack of Freudian familial determinism accords with the romantic quest’s stress on freedom for self-development and creative growth.

Regarded as too comically flippant in comparison with Woolf’s “weightier” novels, *Orlando* was largely neglected by critics for decades,. Many important critical texts on Woolf’s “major works” still fail to include a chapter on *Orlando* (For instance, Caramagno’s award-winning psycho-biography on Woolf, *The Flight of the Mind*, neglects *Orlando* while treating all of Woolf’s other “major” novels and many of Woolf’s “lesser” works.) I would argue that the critical neglect of *Orlando* is partially the result of its idiosyncratic nature, and the related failure to place it within familiar literary contexts. By identifying *Orlando* as a quest, I have attempted to provide a positive conceptual model for approaching the text, one which situates it within a rich literary tradition.

Reading *Orlando* as a poetic quest shows how Woolf puts a feminist slant on a romantic convention. In *Orlando*, Woolf consciously genders the quest, which has traditionally been a masculine domain, associated with male mythical

heroes. As the narrative begins, Orlando appears to be following the example of male quest heroes, as he dreams of war and empire while “slicing at the head of a Moor” (13). But Orlando soon tires of the patriarchal quest: “But when he had heard a score of times how Jakes had lost his nose and Sukey her honor – and they told the stories admirably, it must be admitted – he began to be a little weary of the repetition” (31). From this perspective, Orlando’s transformation reflects Woolf’s rejection of patriarchal narrative conventions. In their place, Woolf asserts an unlikely hero, a woman whose life is consumed with reading, writing and relationships. Her literary life discomfits the biographer, who worries that her refusal to participate in the life of action, so necessary for maintaining the interest of the reader, will jeopardize his project. After cataloguing, “She wrote. She wrote. She wrote” (266), the narrator complains that Orlando has no consideration for her biographer because she concerns herself with “thought and imagination,” which are “of no importance whatsoever” (268). But the biographer concedes, “[W]hen we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead” (268). The narrator soon admits, however, that Orlando fails to participate in the Lawrencian erotic ideal by refusing to engage in an affair with her gamekeeper. As a narrative strategy, Orlando’s emerging femininity recodes the conventions of the patriarchal quest narrative. By introducing the text as a conventional male, heroic quest, Woolf draws her reader into a familiar narrative structure, before undercutting the constraints of the sub-genre. She parodies, distorts, and reinscribes the constraints of the quest narrative by featuring a woman protagonist who prefers books to adventures.

Approaching *Orlando* as a quest also recasts the gender debate swirling around the text. Because of the protagonist's involuntary sex change, critical debate has centered around the issue of gender in the text. Many feminist critics have battled over lines from *Orlando*'s "clothes philosophy" passage (153-7) to support their views on essential versus constructed femininity. By reading *Orlando* as an internalized quest, one may interpret the gender switch as the instantiation of Woolf's principle in *A Room of One's Own* that the "great mind is androgynous" (98). Thus, Caughie argues that those who seek in *Orlando* metaphysical truths about gender are misled: "What *Orlando* presents, then, is not a metaphysical theory but a play of forms. Woolf's androgynous vision affirms Gallop's 'permanent alternation,' a persistent oscillation as our binocular vision allows us to see both duck and rabbit in Wittgenstein's sample sketch" (411). By reading Orlando's androgyny as a metaphor for her fluid, transformational selfhood rather than as the final word on gender difference, the reader affirms the protagonist's quest instead of getting lost in the debate over the nature of Orlando's sex change.

In the end, *Orlando* is an affirmation of desire, and the impulse to create. In one passage, the narrator offers a hyperbolic paean to desire in opposition to the workings of Empire: "Hail! Natural desire! Hail! Happiness! Divine happiness! And pleasure of all sorts. . .and anything, anything that interrupts and confounds the tapping of typewriters and filing of letters and forging of links and chains, binding the Empire together" (294). In Woolf's novel, desire is celebrated, not opposed by the armor of a fixed identity. This explains why many have praised *Orlando*'s "erotic style" and its lack of restraint (Naremore 190). Orlando's

boundless, playful desire refuses to be captured, demarcated, or “fenced in.” As Karen Lawrence sums up, “Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* stages the mobility of fantasy and desire; it is a narrative of boundary crossings – of time, space, gender, sex” (253). Both in style and theme, the novel affirms the unconscious flow of desire in the protagonist’s open, wandering identity, creating transformations and revisions that continually revitalize the ecstatic Orlando.

Is the quest fulfilled? The final passages of the novel represent only a partial fulfillment of Orlando’s quest, as she summons her “true self,” finds communion with her husband, and sights the elusive “wild goose.” Most critics read the novel as resisting closure. Both Bowlby and Caughie argue that Woolf’s impulse to “go on” with the protagonist and the narrative imply a form of wandering toward an unknown destination, an endless becoming. As Bowlby says, “Woolf is engaged in questioning the very notion of straightforward directions and known destinations, it is not clear what those lines will be, or where they will go” (15-6). In Orlando’s quest, the end of the journey as well as the protagonist’s identity are undetermined. Similarly, Caughie argues that *Orlando*’s lack of closure is strategic:

Orlando’s androgyny and diuturnity are not a testament to some essential and enduring human nature but an affirmation of adaptation and change and of the life sustaining impulse to create fictions. The wild goose and the ellipsis assure us that nothing will be concluded, that the chase will continue. We can only respond, “Encore!” (411-2)

Like Orlando, the narrative resists closure or death. Orlando’s enduring, shifting nature affirms the “impulse to create fictions” and his/her continual transformation.



Like Bowlby and Caughie, I agree that *Orlando*'s conclusion is not the end but the beginning of the quest. While the wild goose is in sight, it still eludes Orlando. It may take Orlando more time to write her masterpiece. As Woolf says of Mary Carmichael in *A Room of One's Own*, "She will be a poet[ ]in another hundred years' time" (94). This may leave hope for the eventual fulfillment of Orlando's quest, since s/he has already lived through five centuries.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Many critics have attempted to locate *Orlando* within a particular literary genre, noting the difficulty of such a project. For John Graham, *Orlando* is a fantasy novel (101). J.J. Wilson calls it an “anti-novel” in the tradition of Sterne’s and Diderot’s works (173). Both Judy Little and James Naremore place *Orlando* in the tradition of “mock-biography” (68, 202). In contrast with these readings, I interpret *Orlando* as a revision or parody of the romantic quest to emphasize how Woolf’s protagonist resembles the romantic rendering of the transformative self in search of its creative powers. While my reading may be useful in foregrounding certain aspects of the text, I also think it is equally legitimate to categorize *Orlando* as a parodic *Bildungsroman*, a mock-biography, an anti-novel, a satirical myth, or a fantasy. The difficulty of placing *Orlando* within traditional literary genres is compounded by Woolf’s ambiguity in talking about it. In her diary, Woolf says, “*Orlando* was the outcome of a perfectly definite, indeed overmastering impulse. I want fun. I want fantasy. I want (and this was serious) to give things their caricature value” (134). In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf calls the text her attempt to “revolutionize biography in a night” (Naremore 202). As the reader can see from Woolf’s diaries, the novel is a study in both genre-crossings and gender-crossings.

<sup>2</sup> Here, Lokke is referring to the apparent contradiction in *A Room of One’s Own* between Woolf’s ideas of the “incandescent mind” and the statement that “[W]e think back through our mothers if we are women.” See Kari Elise Lokke, “*Orlando* and Incandescence: Virginia Woolf’s Comic Sublime,” pp. 235-41.

<sup>3</sup> Young Orlando’s violent experiences of disillusionment over his betrayals by Sasha and Greene bears more than a superficial resemblance to events in Woolf’s personal history. After the successive deaths of her father and brother at the turn of the century, Woolf endured a cycle of mental collapse and recovery vaguely reminiscent of (yet much more terrifying and longer-lasting than) Orlando’s trances.

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Karen Lawrence interprets Orlando’s return from Turkey as a decision to reinscribe literary traditions. As Lawrence says, “Woolf represents both the necessity of confronting one’s ‘inheritance’ and of transforming it with new paradigms of female desire” (275). Lawrence’s article “Orlando’s Voyage Out” reads Orlando’s voyage to Turkey as an embrace of otherness, and Lawrence is puzzled by the protagonist’s return to England, which she views as a rejection of the other and the Orient. I would argue that Orlando’s round-trip journey to Turkey makes more sense when viewed within the departure/return cycle of the quest. Generally speaking, in the quest (for instance, in Greek myth, Arthurian legends or *The Faerie Queen*) the quester ventures out to confront a challenge to his personal growth or the community’s survival before returning home. In an internalized quest, the poet must face obstacles to her/his creative development to attain “mature powers” of composition. In either case, the quester returns to her/his starting place having achieved some personal growth.

<sup>5</sup> Nick Greene’s attitude here – his criticism of Shakespeare and other prominent Elizabethans – explains why J.J. Wilson argues that Greene is modeled after “Robert Greene, who in 1592 had the temerity to criticize the only god left standing in *Orlando*, the one true father, Shakespeare” (178).

<sup>6</sup> The many pearls shining from Orlando’s neck at the end of the novel are a multiple, rather than a unified, form of incandescence. Kari Elise Lokke says that introducing the quality of multiplicity into the discussion of modernist impersonality represents Woolf’s feminist rewriting of the masculine rhetoric surrounding this aesthetic. Lokke says, “Like a prism, *Orlando* transforms the white light of Romanticism into the ‘million tints’ (O 317) of contemporary feminist criticism and women’s art.” Moreover, the pearl necklace, traditionally worn by a woman, contributes to a feminist interpretation of this symbol of incandescence.

<sup>7</sup> Although I do not emphasize Orlando’s shifting gender in my paper, it is inextricably related to the issue of Orlando’s fluid selfhood. As Caughie says, “Androgyny is a metaphor for change, for openness” (411). Like Caughie, Bowlby argues that Orlando’s androgyny is not a happy unity of male and female elements, but an affirmation that femininity is “an inherently unstable position” (59).

<sup>8</sup> While I appreciate Little’s use of the term “liminal” and her perspective on Orlando’s basically transformative self, there seems to be a flaw in her argument. After asserting that Orlando is perpetually forced into a liminal state, Little contends that Orlando’s essential self remains unchanged. She says, the “main character does not change in any essential way; only Orlando’s social behavior changes from age to age” (1983: 70). Naremore similarly argues that Orlando does not change in any fundamental way during

the novel. He says that although the “costumes change, the actors remain essentially the same” (195). I would respond that Little’s use of the term “liminal” undermines her argument that Orlando does not experience any fundamental change. What anthropologist would argue that a member of a society going through a rite of passage, a liminal state, does not undergo any meaningful internal change?

<sup>9</sup> One might say that Orlando’s writing is the expression of desire, while the narrator’s writing represents a death drive. I find Little’s comment that *Orlando* serves as a “holiday” for both Woolf and its title character applicable here (74). *Orlando*’s holiday atmosphere contrasts with Woolf’s novels directly preceding and succeeding it. Both *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* are concerned with death and war, while a life-affirming spirit prevails in *Orlando*. Little believes that the conclusion at the present moment reflects the narrator-biographer’s lack of presumption toward the future. She says, “[The future] is yet to be written. The radical implication of *Orlando* is that the future is open, that the spirit of one age will not necessarily speak the text of the one to follow. Values, nature, and gender roles are not universal in definition, but await the poets like Orlando, politicians like the Queen, and literary critics such as Nicholas Greene. This openness, this refusal to pose as a universal, comic statement about the ‘human condition,’ gives *Orlando* its contraband character” (188).

<sup>10</sup> Jones refers to Derrida’s account of Nietzsche’s affirmative woman in *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*. In the essay, Derrida describes the affirmative woman as such: “Woman is recognized and affirmed as an affirmative power, a dissimulatress, an artist, a dionysiac. And no longer is it man who affirms her. She affirms herself” (97). Jones’ sense of Orlando as the affirmative woman, as “a dissimulatress, an artist,” recurs in her description of Orlando as participating in a masquerade (108).

<sup>11</sup> Both Ellen Carol Jones and Jamie Hovey have commented on how Orlando’s participation in otherness is made possible through *masquerade*. Jones says the masquerade is precisely what allows Orlando to continually move outside of social codes: “In its sexual and textual oscillations, *Orlando* perpetually opens itself to otherness; the split or *vide* is never sutured” (110). Hovey’s article “‘Kissing a Negress in the Dark’: Englishness as a Masquerade” concentrates on how Orlando’s pose of conventionality enables her to participate in deviant social and sexual practices (402).